

# EYEBURN

Hot & Spicy  
Movie  
Reviews



ISSUE #1

WRITTEN & ILLUSTRATED BY  
EM B



No rating system is universal; the impact a film has on you is dependent not just on its own quality, but when/where you watched it, who you watched it with, and what you have going on in your life. With that in mind, I rate movies not on objective merit, but as a guideline for comparison between other movies I've seen, like a litmus test. That means my ratings are highly arguable! If I loved a movie you hated, for example, maybe you should give a movie I didn't like a shot.

I score movies based on four different factors: entertainment value, technical quality, narrative/storytelling, and lasting impact. This isn't an exact science and I'm not "grading" these movies per se, but these categories are generally what I find myself referring back to after writing so many casual reviews.

I use a 5-star system with half stars instead of a #/10 because I know I would be tempted to use 0.5 increments anyway, and that would be too extensive a scale. I do allow a rare ★★★★★+ rating for movies that transcend rating for me, and that I will take with me to the grave. I know a lot of people are picky about how things are rated (or that things are rated at all), so I hope you can understand where I'm coming from.

On the following page is a chart of whole-star ratings with some examples.





Perfect movies, the target audience is one person and that person is me.

*MAD MAX: FURY ROAD • SPIDERMAN: INTO THE SPIDERVERSE*



Wholeheartedly recommend, great stories filmed well that kept me engaged during and after viewing.

*AKIRA • KNIVES OUT • THE FAREWELL*



I walked out of this movie thinking, "that was great." Had some criticisms but overall a worthwhile experience.

*WHAT WE DO IN THE SHADOWS • HEATHERS • PAN'S LABYRINTH*



"I recognize that this was a good movie but I did not connect with it,"  
OR "this was objectively pretty bad but I unironically enjoyed it,"

OR "honestly? it was fine."

*JIN-ROH: WOLF BRIGADE • JUPITER ASCENDING*



Painfully average/not memorable,  
OR so-bad-it's-good ironic enjoyment,  
OR can't overlook the actively bad parts.  
*FRIDAY THE 13TH PART 3 • WILD THINGS*  
• MOST *MST3K* FILMS



Wouldn't recommend even as a thought experiment. Bad, walked out, offensive.  
I'VE SEEN SOME ONE STAR FILMS AND I SURE WISH I HADN'T!

# LITTLE WOMEN

Greta Gerwig (2019)



Had I seen this film alone, tears would have been flowing down my face throughout the entire 2hr15min runtime. I was emotional about the sad parts, the happy parts, the losses and the triumphs, the fact that I was seeing this complex relationship between these sisters on screen. I cry a lot in general, but this movie really got me.

To be honest, I almost didn't go see it - period dramas tend to fly under my radar. Typically, I find romance stories uncomfortable and boring, and unconsciously associated the entire genre with those adjectives (something which I now have to re-evaluate after this movie). I was tepidly interested after finding out this iteration is directed by Greta Gerwig. I loved her previous film, *Lady Bird*, because it was one of the first films I felt accurately captured the relationship between a high schooler/rising college freshman and her mother. So I gave *Little Women* a shot.



And wow. Once again, I felt like Gerwig understood me in a way I don't get very often, and this time with four sisters from the 1800s. Despite my claims of not being interested in romance, this story about what love means felt like it was made for me.

But that's the thing; Gerwig's *Little Women* examines what it means when something is "important," whether it's the stories we tell or the people we love. One of my favorite exchanges, between Jo and Amy, goes as follows:

AMY: *Maybe we don't see those things as important because people don't write about them.*

JO: *No, writing doesn't confer importance, it reflects it.*

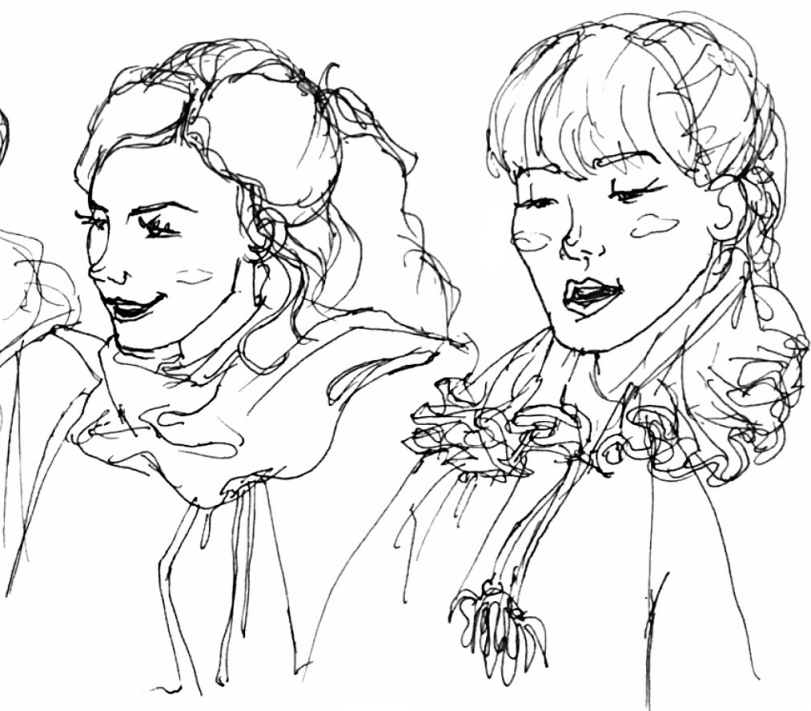
AMY: *I'm not sure. Perhaps writing will make them more important.*

Direct? Yeah. But it's an important point that the whole movie builds up to. Why was I so emotionally affected during this movie, to the point of tears? Because I was watching other people experience struggles and triumphs I could relate to, and that in itself made me feel seen, understood, and validated.

(Gerwig does such a great job in this, I actually feel like I would be upset by the original novel. She updates the story - the ending in particular - in a subtle way which still feels faithful to Alcott's vision, but scoots around the restraints of the time. This is lampshaded when Jo's publisher comments that if the main character of her novel is a woman, by the end of the story she must be either "married or dead.")



It also helps that this movie was masterfully created. The camerawork and editing are done in a way that melts into the story, transporting you into the space so as to make you forget you're sitting in front of a screen, something deceptively difficult to achieve. When the sisters speak, their dialogue overlaps, they talk through each other, the way family does. We are first introduced to them in a hectic scene involving a curling iron and a lot of screaming. The actors are all fully immersed in their roles, especially Florence Pugh (as Amy), who somehow seems both 13 and 20 years old. I've seen a few clips of the 1994 film, which I know is well loved, but comparatively feels much more stilted and (reasonably) much more 90s.



Since watching this movie, I've heard a few people say things like, "there's *another* adaptation of *Little Women*? Not interested, thanks," and to that I say: No!! I get it, but this is different! Give this movie the chance it deserves!! It's not just "another" adaptation, nor just "another" period piece - it is, in its own right, a beautiful film.

# 1917

Sam Mendes (2019)



So, okay. I looked it up and this movie has been very well received. Here's the thing... I won't call this a "bad" movie, because it's definitely not. It's not even subpar. It's good. But it's not my kind of movie, I'll say that up front. I don't dislike war stories (two of my favorite books for a while were *All Quiet on the Western Front* and *Slaughterhouse 5*, if you need me to prove something), but something about watching it on screen hits different. I ended up seeing this in theaters on the recommendation of my partner, who said it had a good emotional crux, wasn't reliant on man-pain, and was a technical masterpiece. Interestingly, those ended up tying into the issues I had with the film.

My biggest complaint: the fact that this was advertised as being done in a single shot. On some cynical level, I kind of understood the need for this. I don't know how big an audience a new World War I movie would have drawn. But a World War I movie done in one take? Now that's something new. Technically, it was impressive and seamless. However, I feel like this is a good example of a

sort of “schticky filmmaking”. During the movie, instead of thinking about the characters, I found myself wondering what the point of the single take was, or trying to pinpoint where the footage might have been spliced together, and at times being actively distracted by the fact it was happening at all.

My favorite part of filmmaking is editing. I love how the juxtaposition and timing between shots can communicate an element of the scene subconsciously - so a big part of me is (hilariously) offended when I see praise for long takes as a concept, especially when it’s argued that it makes a scene feel more “real”. Disclaimer: long takes, at times, work great. In fact, there were many points in this movie when the long take is extremely effective, such as when Schofield and Blake are crossing No Man’s Land, or the emotional death scene at the farmhouse.



But can you imagine how much more effective it would be both watching this soldier pass away in real time, and simultaneously realizing the footage isn't going to cut away, as opposed to already knowing the camera will stay on them? I get emotional thinking about that, on multiple levels.

Speaking to the level of realism a one-shot provides, more often than not I find it to be less than a scene with normal (or "normal") cuts. The perspective the audience gets throughout the film is this smooth, constantly moving camera that floats around the actors, which isn't a perspective you would ever have in real life. Does the feeling of realism come out of the sense of time, then? Again, I would argue not necessarily. The scenes I previously mentioned do successfully feel long, grueling, and tense, but at other points I found it almost silly, such as when Schofield is picked up by the passing unit. And canonically, this movie isn't even one take, as he blacks out around the climax of the film.

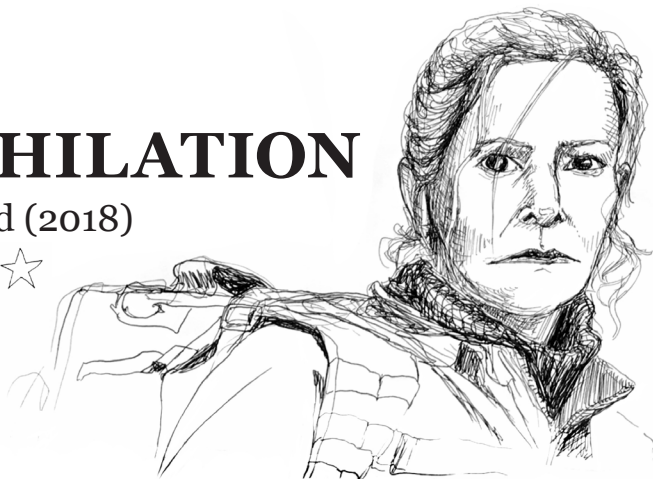
While this movie did a good job portraying the horrors of war (ie makeup, set design, visuals), I didn't find myself connecting with any of the characters. It does, I think, raise a good question of the purpose of upsetting media like this. In no way was this exploitation, but watching young soldiers slowly die, not as heroes, but as people, is obviously upsetting. As someone who is already solidly anti-war, I don't find myself getting a lot out of these movies. Perhaps the purpose is to keep these stories alive to share with new generations, to never forget, and never repeat? The story is, after all, based on the life of Mendes's own grandfather. So, possibly. But in the end, all I know is that I'm really stuck on this whole one take thing.





# ANNIHILATION

Alex Garland (2018)



This is a movie I decided to watch based solely on those three notes from the trailer. You know the ones: the three descending tones that dig straight into your temporal lobe and haunt you with an essence of nightmare, but the kind you want to be in, in a cosmic horror sort of way. When I die, I hope this is the melody I get to hear on repeat.

*Annihilation* was pretty close to what I wanted, based just on that. Trying to explain it feels like an optical illusion. On the surface, the plot can be described in a straightforward way - after the return of her presumed dead husband, a biologist joins a dangerous mission into "Area X," a mysterious phenomena spreading along the coast, to discover what happened to him. Only, that's not really what the movie is about. Everything from the creatures they encounter to the results of the encounters themselves are representations of identity, self-destruction, and purpose. This is a film about who we are and what that means, about our reactions to the world around us. This is a film about cancer.

At many points, this film is blunt with its themes, through both visual metaphor and dialogue:

DR. VENTRESS: *... I think you're confusing suicide with self-destruction. Almost none of us commit suicide, and almost all of us self-destruct. In some way, in some part of our lives. We drink, or we smoke, we destabilize the good job... and a happy marriage. But these aren't decisions, they're... they're impulses. In fact, you're probably better equipped to explain this than I am... You're a biologist. Isn't the self-destruction coded into us? Programmed into each cell?*

And later,

KANE: *I thought I was a man. I had a life. People called me Kane. And now I'm not so sure. If I wasn't Kane, what was I? Was I you? Were you me?*





The only thing this film is really not about, is aliens.  
(Although... you could argue it also sort of is.)

This directness would make this movie great for a Film Theory 101 course, and I truly mean that in the best way possible. As easily as these themes and questions are accessed, none of them can be answered without your own serious participation. Kane asks who he is. Well, who is he? And who are you? Halfway through the film we come upon a field of plants that have integrated human DNA into their own structure, like light through a prism. Some things are forced to change, and some choose to. If you change, are you still you? What does that mean?

Of course, *Annihilation* isn't just a philosophical discussion - what would be the point in making it a film if it were? Start to finish this movie is rife with beautiful imagery. I'm a big fan of Jeff Vandermeer's original novel (I still have yet to read the rest of the Southern Reach trilogy, but the first is quick and definitely worth your while if you have yet to experience it) and Garland does a wonderful job translating the dreamlike scenarios from text to screen.

*Annihilation* is a good example of how to make an adaptation. It is almost entirely separate from the novel, about which I've heard some people complain, and I kind of get it. But when I think about scenes from the book I missed - the run on sentence endlessly growing along the tower walls, the biologist stumbling into an unfathomable amount of written recordings (more than would be possible from previous expeditions), her careful studies of her own cell mutations - well... I may read a book to be inside a character's mind, but I don't want to watch a movie to read a book, if you know what I mean.

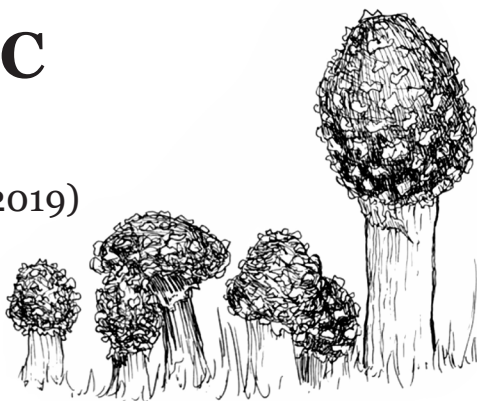


To be clear, I'm not at all saying an adaptation that more closely follows the book's plot isn't possible, or even wouldn't be spectacular - but in the end, they're different mediums, and why not take the opportunity to take the best advantage of each? And make no mistake, Garland fully captures the spirit of the book, tonally and thematically, and for *Annihilation* in particular, that is more important than the sequence of events.



# FANTASTIC FUNGI

Louis Schwartzberg (2019)



This documentary opens with Brie Larson (as the voice of All Fungi) narrating about how long they've been thriving on this planet, and when I was at my viewing, I almost walked out of the theater. The tone felt akin to a VHS tape a disinterested elementary school substitute teacher would put on for the day. I'm glad I stuck it out, because what unfolded was a fascinating and charming deep dive into all things fungus, sans-patronizing-voiceover. This film, *AHEM*, covered a lot of ground, *WINK*. Everything from medicinal breakthroughs, psychedelics, and the beginnings of human evolution are discussed by mycologists and scientists amid beautiful time-lapse footage of mushrooms.

There are a lot of people who love mushrooms and fungi. I'm not one of them, and I still had numerous moments where I was blown away by what I was seeing. What pushed me to see this in theaters was the recommendation of the owner of a vintage store I frequent, which I couldn't phrase better if I wanted to: "After I saw this film, I thought, mushrooms are going to save the world."

# THE EVIL DEAD

Sam Raimi (1981)



If you love campy, blood-splattered horror flicks, absolutely watch *The Evil Dead*. This film is a master class on practical gore effects, so much so that I wouldn't blame anyone who claimed it more than compensated for the movie's subpar narrative. Don't get me wrong; some of my favorite movies are *Night of the Creeps* (1986) and *Re-Animator* (1985), but what elevated those was their element of humor and solid characterization. There were parts of *The Evil Dead* when I was laughing, for sure, but it didn't quite strike the right balance for me. If anything, it made me more excited to see *Evil Dead II*, presuming that what I hear about it being both gorier and campier is true.



# JOJO RABBIT

Taika Waititi (2019)



This was a weird experience for me. I was interested in this movie primarily because I'm a fan of both Mel Brooks's *The Producers* (1967) and Waititi and Jermaine Clement's *What We Do in the Shadows* (2014). As the film was playing, I was thinking about how much I was enjoying it - maybe not laughing out loud at most of the jokes, but I figured that was just the brand of humor. The shots are very cleanly composed which I liked as a juxtaposition to the dark comedy. Waititi's characterization of imaginary-friend-Hitler is great, not only because of the novelty. I was there for it. And then, at the climax of the film, a major character dies. It was tragic and smartly revealed, and I was shocked to find that I felt absolutely nothing. It doesn't take much for me to cry at a movie, but here, my eyes were bone dry.

After this point the movie turned much darker and many of the jokes began to fall flat for me. I don't necessarily find that a fault of the movie; it's generally better for a movie to have jokes that push too hard than jokes that don't cross any boundaries at all (and for clarity, I think

there is a difference between “pushing boundaries” and “being offensive”.) In theory, I appreciated the change in tone as that final jolt of its theme, “mindlessly following an ideology in order to be in a group can lead to dire consequences,” but on an entirely personal level I wasn’t connecting to what was going on. I’m sure there were a lot of factors that lead to me feeling this way - not the least of which is the fact that one of the last things the protagonist does is tell a major lie for his own benefit, and this is a can of worms that I could dedicate paragraphs to (I understand he quickly sees the error of his ways etc etc but it doesn’t feel right to me) - but I think it boils down to “at the time and place of my viewing of this movie, it just didn’t do it for me.” I felt like I should have loved this movie and I just didn’t, and that left me disappointed.

Originally I had this film at a 3.5/5; I begrudgingly added the extra half star after a few heated conversations I had with people who loved it. Overall I understand its appeal and its merit, and on no grounds can I rightfully not recommend a watch. It’s worth a watch. But that’s genuinely the best I can say about it.



# HARLEY QUINN: BIRDS OF PREY

Cathy Yan (2020)



It's hard to have a more sophisticated thought on a movie than *IT FUN! GO SEE!* when it reduces your endorphine blasters to a childlike state of excitement. A pretty accurate translation of my experience seeing *Birds of Prey* would be a string of fragments: Wow - Amazing - I can't believe it - This is incredible - Gay - This is so fun - That's *actually* gay.

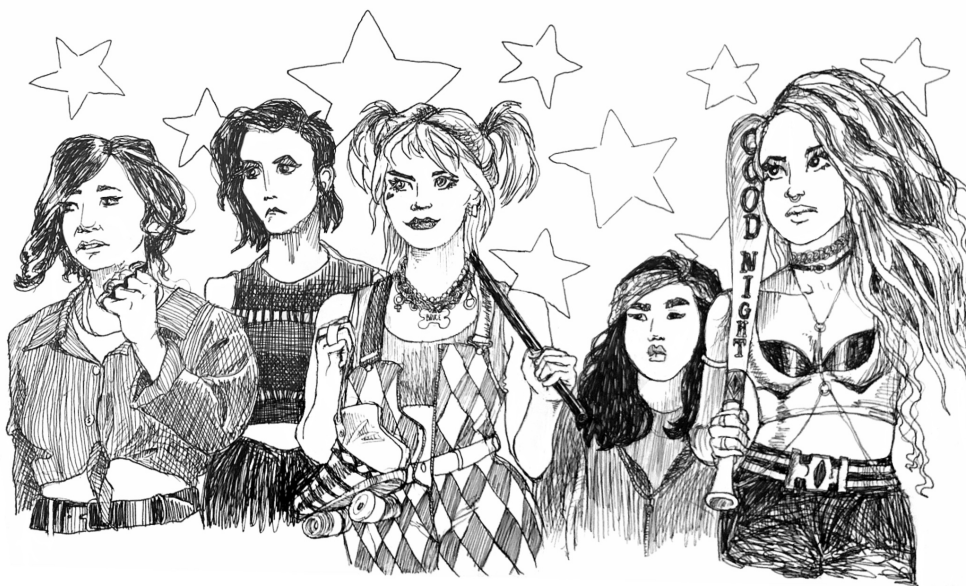
I saw *Avengers: Endgame* when it came out in theaters last year. There is a scene during the final battle when all of the women came together in a single shot, and it was one of the worst things I've ever seen. It was commercialized feminism at its least genuine, it made it obvious the rest of the movie was by and for men, and worst of all it showcased how inconsequential most of Marvel's heroines actually are.

I bring this up because during the climax of *Birds of Prey*, when the plotlines converge, there is a shot when the four heroes come together and team up to protect the kid from Black Mask and his goons, and I practically transcended.

It didn't feel like a conglomeration of side characters thrown together based only on gender, and it didn't feel like a cheap marketing ploy. It felt like I was watching a movie made for me.

I wouldn't say *Birds of Prey* is a "movie for women." This is actually kind of weird ground for me. I'm nonbinary, but a lot of the world still acts in binaries. Due to the way people treat me, I find I often (not always) relate to narratives by women in ways I can't by men (RE my review on *Little Women*). I suppose you could say this is a "movie for women" the same way something like *Lord of the Rings* is a movie "for men" which is to say that it's not at all, and it's just a good, fun time, and you should go see it, yes, you.

That said, gender is something people find hard to ignore. Throughout this movie, there are heavy instances of misogyny. In so many things I've watched, when there's a "strong woman," it's shown by some throwaway douchebag saying something misogynistic that everyone



else scoffs at, and she proves him wrong by verbally or physically “besting” him, as if it’s her responsibility to do so (keeping with the Marvel comparisons, think Peggy Carter’s introduction in the first *Captain America*). In *Birds of Prey*, when there’s misogyny, it gets *dark*, and it gets *uncomfortable*, and in most of the scenes there isn’t really a solution. The characters just have to live around it, because to be honest, that’s kind of what tends to happen in real life. (To be clear about the tone - these instances are treated seriously, but it’s never pushed so far as to feel gratuitous or against the overall goal of the movie.) This isn’t really what the movie is about, but it’s an ever present factor. And that’s an example of the difference between a movie “about being a woman,” and a movie “about women.”

So that’s a lot. And this movie is fun? Hell yes. That climactic fight I mentioned earlier takes place in the middle of an abandoned fairground, a set piece that the film uses to its full advantage. Harley is always wearing an absolutely baller outfit. The characters have organic banter with each other, which feels like a low bar, but you’d be surprised. There is a scene when Cassandra goes to Harley’s cramped one bedroom apartment located above the Chinese restaurant. They watch cartoons and eat cereal next to her hyena and I was thinking: damn. I wish I was their friend.

I’d like to end this review on a letter to the director.

*Dear Cathy Yan,*

*Please make more movies.*

*Thanks,*

*Em*

# COLOR OUT OF SPACE

Richard Stanley (2019)



Lovecraftian horror is a team effort between what is written, and what the reader can imagine. If you're told about a creature that is half man, half grotesque goat-lizard-crocodile creature, complete with tentacles and too many mouths, you can imagine how it would drive someone mad on sight. But if you're seeing it - say, in a movie - there's a high chance it will look slightly off the mark, or maybe a little goofy, or leave you with the itching truth that you still have your own sanity intact. Like a weird Schrodinger's Cat analogy, there must be some form out there that is so terrifying it will drive you crazy, but then you see an artistic depiction of it and it's just not that scary. This is how so many Lovecraftian films famously fall below par, or only have a cult following.

Enter *Color Out of Space*. From start to finish I was enthralled with this movie. Instead of the focus being on the titular creature - the color - we spend most of our time watching how the Gardener family descends into madness. When we do catch glimmers of the color, it's satisfyingly

ambiguous; the definite pinkish hue it takes on later feels not so definite when the father, Nathan Gardener (Nicolas Cage) comments on “a big flash, like a pink light... or actually, I don’t even know what color it was, it wasn’t like any color I’d ever seen before.”

It is so much fun watching this family go at each other’s throats and meeting progressively more and more disgusting visual treats. Everyone sold their performances, especially Nic Cage, who I think has found a niche as the weird and borderline abusive father a la Jack Torrence. At times you get the impression he’s overacting, but he commits so hard it comes across as uncanny rather than goofy.

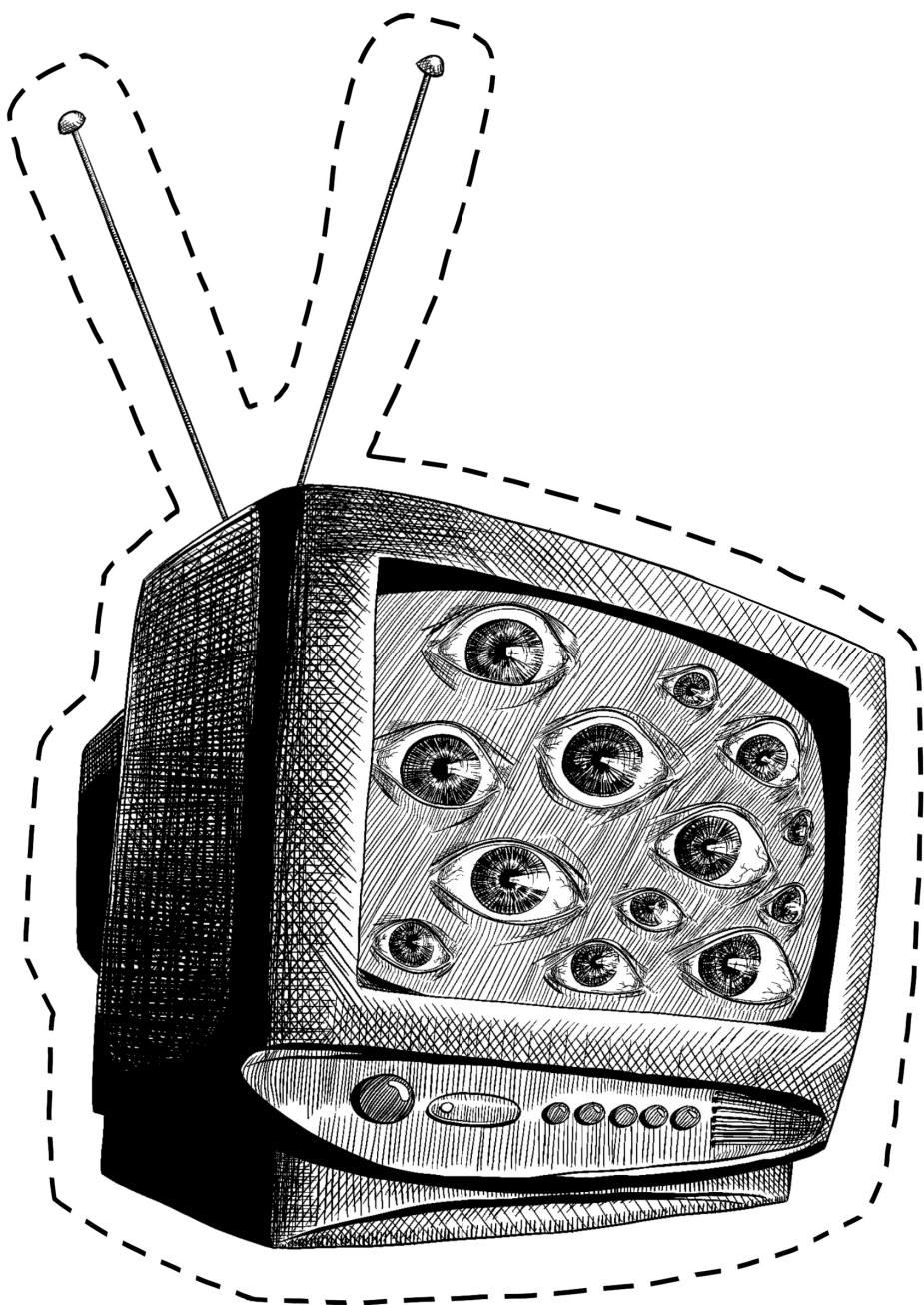
Cosmic horror movies like *Possession* (1981) and *Annihilation* (2018), while they undoubtedly have roots in Lovecraftian mythos, are perhaps considered more widely acclaimed (and less campy) than their direct-adaptation counterparts due to their lack of borrowed textual lore. There are indescribable creatures (aliens?) in both, but what are they? Where are they from? Well, in those movies, it’s not important, and that’s fine. But as a Lovecraft fan, it was wonderful seeing all the homages in *Color Out of Space*, from the name dropping of fictional towns like Arkham (borderline fanservice during the televised weather report) to Lavinia and Ward’s vision of the Great Old Ones.

Everyone knows that famous quote: “The oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown.” True to form, this film ends with the color leaving, seemingly unprompted, no questions answered, future unclear, the





possibility of this all happening again now dangling in the recesses of your conscience, forever. And that's what's so great about it. It's easy to go deep into existential spirals, contemplating the wildest scenarios, dreading the pointlessness of it all. Then you can experience a story like this, and see that the pointlessness and confusion and impossibility of full truth really is as terrible as you think it is. But you keep living anyway, and in a way, that's extremely freeing.



# INCLUDED IN THIS ISSUE



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Color Out of Space



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Thanks for reading!